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SUGGESTIONS FOR COMBINING METHODS IN TEACHING SPANISH

By NINA WEISINGER

THERE is no prospect of an abatement in the demand for "practical" training in Spanish in our colleges. In the face of our growing trade relations with Spanish American countries the situation is a natural one. Our classes are crowded, and there is among the students, particularly in the beginners' classes where experience has not yet blighted their hopes, an epidemic desire to speak Spanish. As teachers we are expected to demonstrate an immediate and visible, or rather audible, value of the knowledge we seek to dispense. Now, it is legitimate that we strive to meet the demand made upon us. The problem is how best to go about our task so as to secure satisfactory and lasting results.

The wave of direct method teaching seems to be still at the crest, and we would not have it otherwise. For my own part, however, my doubts as to the efficacy of elementary instruction entirely in Spanish were crystallized, and my ardor for the method somewhat cooled, on being told, by an eye witness, of an incident that occurred in the Philippines, where the natives are taught in our government schools wholly in English. In the presence of some visitors a very successful teacher was presenting to her class a reading lesson about Jack Frost. She taught with such vivacity, clearness, and thoroughness that both pupils and visitors were enthusiastic. At the close of the lesson the teacher called for comments and original sentences by members of the class. A big, overgrown, awkward Philippino boy in the rear rose and said with great effort, "Jack Frost he can lay eggs." Evidently something had gone wrong thru the all-English method.

I have tried the direct method long enough to see some of the fruits of it. I have seen others try it. It has most of the points in its favor, and not the least of these is its reaction upon the teacher who is using it. But with our limited class periods and our inability to commandeer for our subject a goodly portion of the

students' time, I am convinced that we shall accomplish more, and do it more effectively, by not adhering too closely to this method. For instance, some words and phrases, as well as many principles of grammar, are difficult to explain intelligently in Spanish to students with a limited vocabulary. Why not explain simply in English in one fourth of the time and put in more drill on the Spanish after it has been made intelligible? Many idioms can best be handled this way.

For the first two years the chief purposes of instruction in Spanish are reading knowledge and colloquial mastery. I do not mean that we are to lose sight of the disciplinary value of language training or fail to create appreciation for the great literature that we have within our grasp, but that the above mentioned purposes are dominant during the period of elementary training. Now, I believe it is true that there is no more efficacious way of testing the student's comprehension of what he reads than to let him translate a bit here and there, when it will become evident whether he understands or merely thinks that he does. Far be it from me to advocate a return to the old days of translation. But have not some of us in our haste to get away from the nothing-but-translation method swung to the other extreme and discarded one of our surest weapons? In the second year, at least, and probably in the latter part of the first year, few reading selections should be handled, I think, without the translation of occasional phrases. The likelihood of being called upon to translate serves also as an antidote to the temptation to prepare the lesson in a slovenly manner which arises from the student's willingness to get the drift of what he reads and let accuracy go.

Suppose I give an illustration, which may be in either a first or a second year class, of a reading lesson by a modified direct method. With books closed the class is first subjected to a rapid fire of questions in Spanish to see if they have the subject matter in hand. The answers should be natural, not always in complete sentences, and each must be accurate in expression. Now and then a student may pass to the board to write his question and the answer. As the questions will always be worded so as to be within the comprehension of the class there will practically never be need for the use of English in this part of the recitation.

Then books are opened and oral reading is begun. There are more questions in Spanish on each portion read, partly to give drill

on expressions and partly to keep the mind of the class on the text before them. For variety the reader, or some other student, asks the questions. Occasionally a phrase or sentence is translated into idiomatic English. But translation of a phrase is not the end of it; the victim has to reread it and then repeat it from memory, while the rest of the class is held responsible for being able to repeat it without looking at the book. Questions on grammar should be asked here and there, in Spanish if the matter is simple, otherwise in English, and the Spanish examples repeated several times. It is excellent practice to change from direct to indirect discourse, and vice versa, with questions on the new version. If it is not possible to cover all the reading selection within the limits of the class period, the teacher should choose beforehand the passages that are most fertile for drill.

The problem of grammar is ever with us and always vexing. It is fatal to ignore it, as some dreamers have wished to do. It is deadening to be too attentive to it. If we could only get our classes to see that grammar merely states how the language behaves, we should give them some incentive to acquire its principles of conduct. To this end we early point out simple principles in the texts used, endeavoring to impress upon the students that grammar is studied not as an end in itself but as a means toward intelligent understanding and use of the language. We are unanimous, I take it, in tolerating none but the inductive presentation of the subject. For a long time the textbook on grammar should be kept in the background; its inning will come when so many principles have been observed and drilled on that a summary of them under the proper topic is natural.

To state principles of grammar in English saves a great deal of time which may be spent in drill on illustrations. A number of examples should be well in mind before a rule is stated, and no principle should ever be repeated except in connection with one or more examples. It is often necessary to provide much oral drill in addition to what is found in the reading text. When possible this drill should relate to the objects in sight of the class and the examples should be volunteered by the students.

Since we now have available a number of beginners' books and easy readers, with varied exercises, prepared for teachers who use the direct method, there is not great danger of our beating the air

and getting nowhere in our elementary instruction, especially if we insist on having the students absorb the lessons into their systems. Furthermore, the student has exercises laid out for him that give him a definite task to work at, and that also give him a clue to what the teacher will do with the lesson. But it is not so easy when novels and other reading matter are taken up, which present only a text, with perhaps notes and a vocabulary. This is where the teacher must exercise his ingenuity, and make wise use of English in conducting the recitation, never letting the emphasis be shifted from the Spanish.

Finally, we can not be too insistent with the students that the whole aim of our study is to get the Spanish: we translate only to be sure that we have the correct meaning of expressions that we wish to acquire use of; our talk about grammar is merely to keep in our minds the proper rules of behaviour to which we wish our use of Spanish to conform; we study conjugations to have at our finger tips any verb form that we wish to employ correctly. With this aim constantly before us it is not likely that we shall go far astray in our efforts to combine methods and find the means of arriving with perceptible speed at the goal of practical knowledge of Spanish. If at last our students can understand most of what they see and hear, if they can use their tongues not too haltingly, if they know some governing principles, and if they feel the importance of accuracy in speech and writing, the college can do no more than send them out to the mercy of a practical world.

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